

2011

From Faith to Form

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From Faith to Form

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts at Virginia Commonwealth
University.

by

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December, 2011

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Artist Statement

My life and my art are extensions of my Russian Orthodox faith and Slavic heritage. For many years, I have been influenced by religious folk objects and books found around my home and church. Ultimately, this led me to explore other traditional Slavic forms of iconography. Discovering the commonality between the Russian and American cultures and their arts and crafts has been an ongoing journey.

Originally, whether showing the different ways to portray a flower or a saint, I used only paint. Now, I express my ideas through heating metal, glass, wax, and gems. Understanding how to combine centuries old techniques with a contemporary presentation has become a passion that continues to inspire my jewelry and sculpture.

From Faith to Form

Introduction

I have been making art and crafts my whole life. I have been *writing* icons (*making* icons) since I was sixteen years old. I earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Graphic Design and entered a career where I worked long hours at a computer. Then, after a minor injury my body responded by developing the painful neuromuscular condition called fibromyalgia. Because of this chronic condition, I could no longer work regular eight-hour shifts or sit at a computer doing computer graphics. I had to reinvent myself. I returned to working with two crafts familiar to me, painting icons and decorative folk painting. I also began to teach these techniques to others.

I am of Russian and Slavic descent. My Russian heritage prompted me to explore all aspects of traditional Eastern Orthodox iconography, Christian church-related art, and jewelry techniques. My creative journey started as I investigated my origins and the traditional techniques of the many styles of icons and folk art. This study was accelerated when I began to pursue my master's degree. Now, I wanted to refocus on handcrafted objects after having written icons for over thirty years.

I began my graduate coursework in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) as a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary gift from my husband. I took this gift as an opportunity to concentrate my studies on jewelry and sculpture, with the eventual hope of fulfilling a lifelong dream of teaching at a college or community college. I decided to turn all the work and research I had been pursuing into earning a degree.

Personal Aesthetics

Iconography is a part of church tradition where procedures, handed down from generation to generation, become part of an iconographer's daily routine. A lifestyle of prayer and occasional pain-free days determine which days I successfully perform work. Working under the direction of sacred traditions allows me to be an instrument of God. Iconography is a structured process with limited individual creativity, except possibly in the border design. In order to balance the rigid tradition with my creative yearning, I was looking for a more stimulating way to write icons than was available with traditional painted panels. When I started the MIS-IAR Program, I didn't realize how iconography would influence every aspect of my art.

As I worked on my degree, I was also working on large commissioned murals for a church, ranging in size from 2'x3' to 6'x10'. In contrast, the pieces I made during my MIS-IAR studies were small and intimate. The intimacy allowed me to explore more options with materials and was manageable for my fibromyalgia. I was inspired to merge traditional miniature formats into metalsmithing and jewelry making. I took new steps in creating small pieces, as part of multilayered sculptural work, and transformed my grandiose ideas into smaller formats.

Throughout my life, participating in long church services allowed my senses to take in the beauty of church life. Besides hymns that recreate Christ's story and the candles' glow, the church became a visual bounty to adore. Icons covered the walls and pillars. There were velvet icon banners embroidered with floral designs, and fabric covered icon stands with icon covered *rizas* icons (elaborate metal frames with gems) throughout the main church, or nave. Looking through our iconostasis, or wall of icons that separates the altar from the nave, I saw the altar with its gold tabernacle, a golden bound Bible, ornamental flowers, and other religious items

required for services. On special feast days, fresh flowers that originally adorned a small icon, cross, or tomb were handed out to everyone as a symbolic gift of God's grace. All of this beauty heightened my visual and creative appreciation and motivated me to explore and make other types of icons.

Unfortunately, there were no teachers and few or no books or information available when I first started this process. For example, years ago I read about reversed painted glass icons and wanted to learn more about this technique. I started doing my best to make one of my own. It was only after I actually saw several glass icons at a monastery that I discerned the method to reproduce this technique. This approach became true for most of my endeavors. I learned how to recreate traditional objects using a combination of the craft's basic technique and adapted iconographic processes. The more I searched for glass icons and technical information, the more I discovered other icon styles which eventually led me to the process of enameling.

In contrast to strict iconography procedures, I am motivated also by the freedom of floral design. Flowers are not just decoration in my work but are a symbolic part of the life cycle of the church and of my life as an iconographer. They symbolize admiration when placed around anything. They are everywhere in the church, in my life, in my paintings, in class projects I have taught, in my jewelry, and in my gardens. Floral imagery often adorns icons, and I have taken this motif and expressed it more freely in my jewelry making and other works. As our bodies are sacred, like icons, I see floral jewelry as a way of adorning our bodies. Spring flowers signify rebirth and are a sign of faith and hope. Russian folk art pieces bring floral imagery to everyday objects and tell of their daily experiences. Along with my icons, my decorative painting and love of nature, I weave all these elements together to magnify my love of flowers in my work. With floral imagery and controlled strobework, I mix and match metals and glass formed traditional

and contemporary creations, highlighting things that surround me daily.

Influences and Research

Growing up, my family home displayed many Russian folk arts and Orthodox icons. Fabergé enamels (especially the well-known Fabergé eggs) and silversmithing from the Imperial Russian (Romanov) collections have always inspired me. Other Russian regional works include Rustov miniature enameled icons, floral pendants, and landscape boxes; nesting Matryoshka dolls; Gezhel blue and white porcelain plates and vases; Palekh lacquer boxes; and Zhostovo floral trays and spoons. Each has the same controlled, small, comma-like brush strokes and consistent underlying iconic designs. All styles are used to represent a sense of an inner spiritual light, not natural light, that makes each piece appear to glow. This approach unifies all the Russian pieces stylistically.

The same procedures are used today in creating traditional icons as they have been since the fourth-century AD. All images start by applying the darkest colors first. Lighter layers are added, darker to lightest in four stages, by creating the appearance of light radiating from within. Symbolically, light comes from a person's soul, so the light is rendered in stages from the outside, or edge of each element, to the inside. This Eastern Orthodox, or Byzantine, painting concept represents divine light. The highlight is strongest following the bone structure of the depicted saint, or where the bone pressure touches the top of a garment or skin. Using the same idea for buildings and trees, dark shapes are the foundation for further color refinement to create a sense of radiating light from within. Each of the next stages are also worked from the outside edges to the inside, with comma strokes detailing the highlights of the structure. Painting progressively smaller lines, one on top of another, creates the icon form. The final highlight line

painted on top is what produces a sense of a radiant light from within. Finally haloes, the symbols of spiritual light, are centered around the heads of depicted individuals.

Russian artisans adapted many Western European methods in their traditional artwork. The French processes of cloisonné, champlevé, and basse taille are enameling techniques that were incorporated into elaborate jewelry frames placed around the Russian finift pieces and icons. Finift is the process of porcelain painting on an enameled surface. Each of these French processes takes copper and alters the metal with elaborate and precise methods. In cloisonné, wire is built up on copper disc to form the required shapes, and then enamel powders are filled in between the wires to make rich glass color designs. In contrast, with champlevé and basse taille, copper is etched away and then the enamel is applied into the crevices. I used all of these processes in varying degrees in my work.

Most of the objects I researched and wanted to recreate were made during the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries. I thought I could surely figure out how to make them today. An Albanian instructor made me realize that Eastern European art classes taught historical techniques, whereas those centuries old teachings are not available here in the United States. My plan was to experiment with parent or host techniques, and then adapt those techniques to contemporary materials and applications. With only bits of information available, and minimal Western parent methodologies found, I used the trial and error method.

Now, since the fall of communism and introduction of the Internet, more materials containing historical information on Russian villages and their craft making procedures are available. Having an outlet to buy and study pieces firsthand provided a way for me to learn how to reproduce them. However, much of the knowledge is still unavailable because of the long-standing practice of passing traditions and techniques down from master to apprentice.

Therefore, just like fourteenth-century monks, I had to adapt my own techniques and approaches from what I read and what worked.

Jewelry

Recognizing that there were a multitude of painting teachers in the area, I chose one of my concentrations in jewelry because I wanted better teaching opportunities, and jewelry complemented the metalsmithing part of my sculpture. I was challenged with sheet metal pounding techniques, etching or engraving designs, cutting intricate designs, polishing silver to a smooth finish, drilling pieces and riveting them together, and reinventing the alloys into an expressive piece of metal. Soldering with a torch was a new and exciting technique I used in manipulating the metal. Metal clays were contemporary, malleable, and easy to work with materials that mimicked the look of traditional metals. They reacted like no other clays with their own consistency and workability. These materials gave me a new range to develop works with looks ranging from traditional to expressionistic styles.

Wire is another material I used. I wound, soldered, crocheted, chained, riveted, and spiraled wire to decorate the metal and provide structural support. Wire became an extension of the design that flowed in or around the artwork. I found ways to work with wire that complemented the sheet metal and glass.

Working with a wonderful, triangular cut, semi-clear moonstone, I decided it needed a special setting to accent its beauty. In *Softly Hidden* (Appendix, 1), I specifically fitted the stone with floral leaf prong settings. Instead of the usual straight prong setting, the three-leaf prong setting gave it a bit of whimsy. This botanical design is also a common Byzantine motif. The leaf design mirrored the stone's triangular cut. I cut the same floral leaf design into the silver

holding the stone to give depth to the piece and the stone. This cut, which can be seen through the stone, allows it to reflect light and shine. One of the prongs is also the bail that connects to the chain, giving the piece a sense of solidity. When I start to design a piece of jewelry, I consider how the piece will connect to the chain and how it will lay on the neck. In this piece, the moonstone does not dangle or swing but is solid and stable. All the elements work to unify the essence of the design and the mood of the stone.

I used a more complex Byzantine design for the front of *Inside My Locket* (Appendix, 2 and 2a). Its negative spaces become a window to discover the enamel flower inside. This piece was made out of silver precious metal clay (PMC), which consists of microscopic particles of silver suspended in an organic binder to create pliable clay. After the clay is fired in the kiln, the impurities are burned off and what remains is 99.9 % sterling silver. The front of the pendant's design and hinge parts were cut out of this metal clay, domed, and fired. The back of the pendant was made from a piece of silver metal clay and enameled. I used a silver metal clay syringe to build up layers forming the sidewalls of the flower pattern. After the silver is polished and prepared for the enamel, the enamel powder is put in the crevices of the built up silver petals. That bottom piece is fired again for less than five minutes, making the heated powder a melted, colorized portion of the flower. This back piece was also prepared with hinge pieces that interlocked into the top counterpart piece. Both sides of the hinges are long strips of clay that were formed into loops. Then, the halves were kiln fired separately transforming them into silver. The hinge is wired and the necklace is added to the chain and ready for wear.

Using a torch to create jewelry was a bit more challenging but I learned that soldering silver was much easier than soldering copper. Silver heats faster and it is easier for the solder to flow. In *Pocket Full of Flowers* (Appendix, 3), I soldered a silver bezel (a wire wall that holds

the stones or objects) to hold a porcelain disc onto a copper disc. The metal produced a beautiful red fire scale (a layer of oxides that forms on the surface of metal when heated) on the copper that I decided to keep. Where there was no red, I gilded silver leaf onto the background metal near the bezel. Then, I used acrylic enamels to paint flowers on the silver leaf to complement the flowers that I painted on the porcelain.

I also made *Iris Beauty* (Appendix, 4) by using a combination of materials and techniques. This neckpiece has its opening in the front and forms the shape of a strokework floral pattern design. The iris petals were sculpted out of silver metal clay, formed together, and fired. The sculpted flower was then soldered to the silver wire frame with silver sheet leaves that were previously soldered to the wire. Twisting details around the main three wires, using a cold forming technique, created the mainframe wirework. During my first attempt to attach the iris to the wire frame, the torch cut through the wire when it got too hot. I was able to recycle this short piece of wire into a matching bracelet. This neckpiece is an example of combined materials and my exploration of a new challenge of forming a sculptural three-dimensional piece. I combined cold and hot forming techniques into this design because it brought complexity and more interest to the piece while bringing the flower detail dimensionally off the neckline.

Sculpture

My sculptural works focused on either two-dimensional or multilayered metal works, or some type of metal integration. I explored photography and transfer imaging techniques on metals instead of paper. By using metal and not paper, different processes and results were achieved. Layering on metal and using different materials and methods developed into wired mixed media sculpture pieces. Flowers, icons, and iconic themes were still the focus in my

sculpture as they carried over from my jewelry.

Working with metals, I was able to create a three-dimensional format. I wanted metal to work for my iconography. *Riza of St Elizabeth* (Appendix, 5) has all the elements of an old Russian icon *riza* but in a modern application. Here, my jewelry skills were combined with my metalsmithing and sculpture skills. I folded the *riza*'s framework over from the front to the sides of the icon to finish the edges. The metal *riza* is attached to the wood with tacks over a velvet backing. With this piece, I wanted to cover the icon background with decorated copper but still allow full image of the saint. I took the copper and stamped the background but hammered the border to give a repoussé effect. Repoussé is shaping metal by hammering from the reverse side. Then, I added small rectangular stone plates to each side of the saint. For these areas, I first cut a nickel silver prong and pinched a peridot stone into the setting. Then, I wound coiled copper wire around each setting, and riveted the stone plates on the copper *riza*. On the bottom, I engraved the saint's name on a nickel silver plate and riveted it to the frame. I formed the halo to curve around the painting of the saint, engraved folk art swirls randomly around the halo, and enameled some simple accents to bring attention to the saint's face.

With Russian Imperial silversmithing in mind I created *Sad Little Box* (Appendix, 6), an etched copper box with the textural feeling of a copper *riza*. The swirl design on the surface is based on a botanical vine, which is used on icon clothing and folk art borders. I drilled out the holes on the sides and filed them down. I used a Sharpie marker in a resist technique and applied the design. Then, all of the pieces were immersed in an etching bath and what were the Sharpie marks became the raised part of the copper. This copper box was soldered together with silver solder and then cut. Boxes are a recurring form in the Fabergé and Imperial Romanov collections.

Working in copper metal clay for *Swirl Box* (Appendix, 7), I used metal clay that was already stamped, and kiln fired the pieces. Then, I wired the framework together with thin wire on the bottom for support. With medium wire, I made some coils on the sides for both decoration and stability. Then, I wire wrapped a hematite stone and attached it to the lid, again using the coil theme. Although I was inspired by the Russian collection, most traditional boxes would be made of silver and be intricately covered by engravings, filigrees, or enamellings. My simplified boxes were made in copper because the material is less expensive and because of the different techniques the copper allowed me to use. Both boxes incorporate the techniques found on the *riza* and give a simpler modern design compared to their predecessors' ornate Imperial collection.

Next, I seized the opportunity to work sculpturally in a new way. *A Joyful Offering* (Appendix, 8) was made by using two pieces of cut Plexiglas that sandwiched a contact paper transfer and three metal transfers. The transparent hydrangea images on the contact paper became the framing device for three smaller metal transfer images of hydrangeas. Each frame was made from folded and ink-stamped aluminum metal. Each photograph was altered during a different transfer process producing a variety of end results. Then, three inserts were wired together and attached through small holes in the metal and Plexiglas. These coils resemble many of my wire wrapped jewelry pieces. The final sculpture is a mixed media piece created by using several layered transfer techniques. I used a flower as the image in this piece because, like a garden, each bloom is a work of art yet the hydrangea bush as a whole is what you appreciate.

I wanted to continue exploring metal and glass as unifying elements in my pieces. For this, I explored a kiln fired glass process. It took four different layers to make my glass piece *Part from the Wall* (Appendix, 9). Each layer gave depth, used a different method, and

addressed a separate part of the design. The first layer is glass carved which is a method of firing using special paper. Thick fiber paper is cut into desired shapes and then the glass is placed on top. As it is heated, the glass melts into and around the paper's crevices, which produced its carved or embossed shapes. The second layer was a fused glass piece where I took two pieces of clear glass and sandwiched metal and clear frit in between so they became one piece of glass after firing. I incorporated over-fired, bronze metal clay dust in between the glass that turned blue after firing. Also, in between the same two layers of clear glass pieces I embedded copper foil that turned red. On this same layer, I formed copper wire into circles and combined them to make a triangular pattern to frame the colored pattern on the layer below. For the third layer, I used coarse frit pieces of glass that were broken leftover glass chunks. I used this glass to form the middle leaf pattern. Medium frit made the triangular colors that colored the circles from the previous layer, and fine blue frit made up the middle circle pattern. The fourth and last layer was achieved by frit painting. I formed a barrier around its edge by cutting four strips of glass, which were glued down with hair spray. The hair spray burned off in the kiln while the glass fused together. Putting the original drawing under this layer's clear glass, I mixed aloe gel with lavender or yellow powder frit in a bag to trace the lines of the original design. Then, I poured each colored frit between the lines on this layer. A coating of clear fine frit was placed over the entire surface to prevent bubbles during firing. Previous layers formed parts of the design but on this fourth layer, I painted the complete design to unify all the layers when viewed together.

For this last step, all the layers of glass were glued together. I wire wrapped the glass, and at the top where all the wire came together, I mimicked the curvilinear design of the sculpture. This border element is the same design as *Inside My Locket* (Appendix, 2 and 2a). I was inspired to take the same iconic, botanical design and give it a different setting. This *fleur*

de lis is central to this design as well as many of my other pieces. “Lis” is French for iris and this stylized motif is common in Slavic folk designs. Originally, this design would be on a church wall around icons or windows or would be a design element repeated many times in a row on an enamel or metal icon *riza*, I took it out of its religious context and made the design the focus.

Iconography, with its traditions and its design elements, motivates me to create pieces on a small and precise scale. Researching and learning to use multiple metalsmithing techniques in jewelry and sculpture has allowed me to recreate Russian folk art objects presented in a simpler modern format. Using multiple materials, such as metal, enamel, stones, wire, and glass also gave me a wide range of ways to express my ideas about old traditions and today’s new ones.

Conclusion

When I began studying in the MIS-IAR Program, I avoided painting but in the end I embraced it as it led me to the world of enameling. I took my iconography foundation and transformed images from metals to enamels to glasswork. I researched and developed techniques and approaches. Now, I have all new tools to work with and new processes to explore. I will still make traditional panel icons but am excited to create Americanized church objects for our Pan Orthodox culture here in the United States. I want to share my work and my heritage with others by teaching classes and exhibiting my pieces.

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Figure 1. *Softly Hidden*, Moonstone, Sterling Silver, 1"x3/4"x1/4", 2009.



Figure 2. *Inside My Locket*, Enamel on Silver, 1 5/8"x1 1/4"x3/8", 2010.



Figure 2a. *Inside My Locket*, (opened pendant), Enamel on Silver, 3 3/4"x1 1/4"x3/8", 2010.



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Figure 7. *Swirl Box*, Copper, Copper Wire, Hematite, 1½"x1½"x1 5/8", 2010.



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Figure 9. *Part from the Wall*, Glass, Bronze Clay Dust, Copper Foil, Copper Wire, Silver Wire, Iron Stand, Dimensions of Glass: 9"x7"x1¼", 2010.

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- 1996-present *Iconography Teacher*, Private Studio in Alexandria, Virginia and Honolulu, Hawaii
- 2011 *Visiting Enamel Teacher*, VCU MIS Off-Campus Graduate Art Class- Metal Clay Jewelry Class, class held at: Virginia Run Elementary School, Centreville, Virginia
- 2009 *Metal Embossed Iconography Teacher* at *Icon Exhibit*, Saints Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Church, Washington, DC
- 2008 *Pysanky Egg Workshop*, Fort Belvoir Army Base, Catholic Chapel, Alexandria, Virginia
- 2008 *Metal Embossed Iconography Teacher*, Protection of the Holy Mother of God Orthodox Church Camp, Falls Church, Virginia
- 2005-2006 *Rock Painting Teacher*, Michaels Store, Springfield, Virginia
- 2002-2006 *One Stroke Certified Instructor*, Michaels Stores, Alexandria, Virginia and Springfield, Virginia; AC Moore Arts & Craft Store, Bailey's Corner, Virginia
- 2001-2006 *One Stroke Certified Instructor, Tole Painting Teacher, Children's Watercolor and Drawing Teacher*, Fairfax County Parks Authority, classes held at: Lake Accotink Office, Springfield, Virginia; Key Middle School, Franconia, Virginia; Edison High School, Alexandria, Virginia; Walt Whitman Middle School, Springfield, Virginia
- 2004 Co-taught *Pysanky Egg Workshop*, Saint Luke's Guild Summer Institute, Protection of the Holy Mother of God Orthodox Church, Falls Church, Virginia
- 2004 *Glass Iconography Workshop*, Saint Luke's Guild Summer Institute, Protection of the Holy Mother of God Orthodox Church, Falls Church, Virginia
- 1993-1995 *Italic Calligraphy Teacher*, Hickam Air Force Base, Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Facility, Honolulu, Hawaii
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- 1997-1988 *Italic, Uncial and Advanced Layout Calligraphy Teacher*, Pine Forest High School, Adult Education Program, Pensacola, Florida
- 1986-1988 *Italic and Uncial Calligraphy, Watercolor, and Drawing Teacher*, Naval Air Station Pensacola, Family Service Center, Pensacola, Florida
- 1986-1988 *Italic and Uncial Calligraphy and Watercolor Teacher*, Bobe's Hobby House, Pensacola, Florida

Exhibitions:

- 2011 *From Faith to Form*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia at Verizon Gallery at Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale Campus, Annandale, Virginia
- 2010 *Regional Art Exhibit*, Fredericksburg Center for the Creative Arts, Fredericksburg, Virginia
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